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# Qualitative Research on What Leads to Success in Professional Writing

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# Qualitative Research on What Leads to Success in Professional Writing

## Abstract

This article examines the experiences of advanced students and of graduates in a non-traditional MA in professional writing program to discover how faculty may assure student success in professional writing occupations. The study investigates the knowledge domains and habits of mind that foster student success in writing. The research is the collaborative effort of three rhetoric and composition specialists. Their research discovered that successful writers (1) define success as gaining a response from readers; (2) master six knowledge domains—genre, writing process, rhetorical, subject matter, discourse community, and metacognitive knowledge; (3) put their knowledge into action through eight similar habits of mind—persevering, embracing learning, attempting challenges, responding positively to critique, engaging in collaboration, understanding how to write in complicated contexts, and engaging in metacognition; and (4) acquire these abilities from a range of personal, professional, and academic experiences.

## Keywords

Student success in writing, Success in professional writing

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## **Qualitative Research on What Leads to Success in Professional Writing**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the experiences of advanced students and of graduates in a non-traditional MA in professional writing program to discover how faculty may assure student success in professional writing occupations. The study investigates the knowledge domains and habits of mind that foster student success in writing. The research is the collaborative effort of three rhetoric and composition specialists. Their research discovered that successful writers (1) define success as gaining a response from readers; (2) master six knowledge domains—genre, writing process, rhetorical, subject matter, discourse community, and metacognitive knowledge; (3) put their knowledge into action through eight similar habits of mind—persevering, embracing learning, attempting challenges, responding positively to critique, engaging in collaboration, understanding how to write in complicated contexts, and engaging in metacognition; and (4) acquire these abilities from a range of personal, professional, and academic experiences.

### **Introduction**

Professional writing careers and the many other careers that require substantial writing are only partly rule-defined and have much to do with listening to other people, reading the constraints of situations, and responding creatively to these factors in a timely and pragmatic fashion. Individuals who master such professional practice will become the knowledge workers of the coming decades, the workers who many view as capable of helping the U.S. economy cope with the loss of dominance in the manufacturing sector. Consequently, studying how adult learners transfer knowledge and skills they have gained from formal education and independent study into application in career settings should shed light on how educators can facilitate for students this critical shift from someone who can follow instructions to someone who can be a proactive and responsive professional writer who is capable of seeking new learning when needed, accepting challenges, and persevering until a project is complete.

Having taught many highly motivated adults in a master's program in professional writing, the authors noticed that some talented students do not reach their goals while others succeed beyond their and our expectations. Two of us are specialists in applied writing and rhetoric with experience in nonprofit and corporate writing; the other is a composition studies specialist who is the founding director of the graduate program. Sharing this

observation led us to design a qualitative research study that focuses on 15 students and graduates of a master's program in professional writing. These are advanced students spanning the ages of late twenties to their sixties. Some are career changers and some are developing skills for their first career. In this MA program, these students study three areas of professional writing: creative writing, applied writing—which covers business, journalistic, and technical writing—and rhetoric and composition. Students select one of these areas as the primary focus of their study; at the same time, they also take courses in at least one additional concentration.

In considering how these students have or have not been gaining access to careers in professional writing, we set out to identify the knowledge domains and cognitive and affective habits of mind that characterize students who we believe achieved success as professional writers. We discovered that little research had been done on the kind of advanced writers and learners who enroll in this MA program. Much more attention has been paid to novice learning than to adult learning or to how adults expert in one kind of professional practice may transfer their expertise to another kind of professional practice (see Geisler, 1994; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993). Further, most other studies of writers' development have focused on more homogeneous groups, such as the following three longitudinal studies: the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing led by Nancy Sommers (2004), which investigated traditional-age undergraduates and their academic writing; Lee Ann Carroll's (2002) study of undergraduate writers at Pepperdine University; and the Stanford Study of Writing (Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005). Similarly, Anne Beaufort's (1999) ethnographic study of four writers making the transition from writing for college to writing for the workplace focused on a cohort of traditional-age college graduates.

Unlike these studies, because we were interested in writing career success, we settled on four unique research questions that then became dimensions for analysis:

- How do writers define success?
- What knowledge domains do writers draw from?
- What habits of mind foster their success?
- Where and how did they acquire these habits of mind?

## Qualitative Research Design

To pursue our research questions, we selected a purposeful sample of professional writing students and graduates whom we believed to be successful. This group was not a cohort of students; they entered the program at different points in time and did not all know one another. This "best case sampling," as Cheryl Geisler (2004, p. 18) has described it, offers us compelling success stories and, more important, ones we hope will help us posit a model of success for adult writing students. Our approach to the research design was contextual and inductive and could be construed as "grounded theory." As defined by Lomborg and Kirkevoid (2003): "The methodology was introduced in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a method to explore social processes and reveal the human characteristic of anticipating and responding to various life circumstances" (p. 191). Heath and Cowley (2004) and Lomborg and Kirkevoid (2003) emphasize that grounded theory moves from induction, drawing upon the interpretation of the data based on the researchers' own knowledge of the process being studied, to empirical generalization and theory. As Heath and Cowley (2004) explain, "grounded theory sees researchers as social beings whose experiences, ideas and assumptions can contribute to their understanding of social processes observed" (p. 143). Our approach could be described as grounded theory because the categories of analysis emerged from our review of the videotaped interviews.

The research design also depended on our intentionally establishing a collaborative, reciprocal relationship with the participants, as discussed by Powell and Takayoski (2003) and Cushman (2004).

When we recruited writers for this project, we asked that they select a single text to use as the basis for the interview. Though the text could be of any genre, we asked that they select one that they considered to be challenging and significant to their development as writers. In addition, we asked that they recall details of the text's construction, including the process followed, those with whom they had collaborated and their interactions, and specifics about the situations that motivated the projects. We also supplied prospective participants with a list of ideas we intended to discuss during our interviews. These focused on the nature of the project, its challenge to them as writers, and how they felt they had met those challenges. The "Description of Text to be Selected for Reflective Analysis" and "Interview Questions and Ideas for Discussion" are included in Appendix A.

In fall 2004, we interviewed 15 writers in their workplaces and home offices, and for those who wished, we held interviews in the rare book room of the university library. These interviews were videotaped, and the three of us conducted the interviews as guided conversations. Most of the writers—10 out of the 15—discussed completed projects. Four discussed projects that they were working on at the time of the interview. Consequently, most responses were entirely retrospective, and those writers who discussed current or unfinished projects were substantially underway and had completed significant portions of drafts.

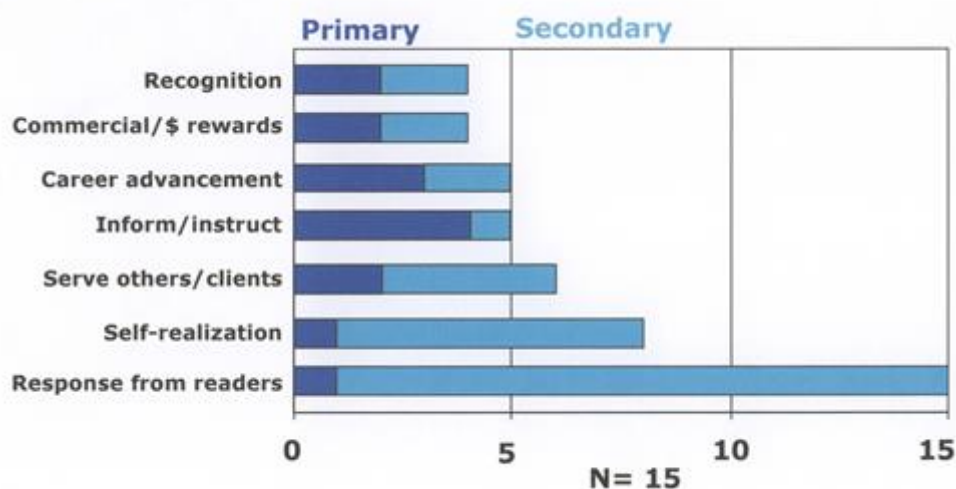
The participants in this study were diverse in terms of their education, career experience, gender, age, personality, and rapport with researchers. In addition, the texts they selected varied immensely by genre, subject matter, and process. They discussed novels, annual reports, feature articles, a play, a corporate client magazine, an editorial, management report, media guide, documentary, and an academic thesis proposal.

Although we had selected these writers because we viewed them as successful, we wanted to know how they defined success. Asking them to define success in terms of a significant text and a particular moment in their careers allowed them to provide concrete examples of their motivations to become professional writers.

### **How Do Writers Define Success?**

A short video clip of one of the research participants, Jennifer Cuthbertson (1), expresses the dominant view of success that the 15 writers shared. Jennifer came to the program after two successful careers that did not center on writing: She worked in crisis management for the Red Cross, and she taught high school English. When we interviewed her, Jennifer was a magazine editor for *Quilt* magazine; she has since become a communications manager for Emory Healthcare in Atlanta. In her interview, Jennifer talked about the opinion piece on teaching high school she wrote for *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*. Jennifer describes in this brief video clip that the large number and variety of responses the editorial received made her feel successful as a writer. ([Click here for Jennifer's video clip](#); [click here for Jennifer's written transcript](#)) (Videos are in [QuickTime](#) format.)

Most writers expressed multiple definitions of success over the course of the hour-long interviews. The bar graph (Figure 1) summarizes all the success definitions that emerged during the interviews and shows that each writer conceives of success in more than one way.

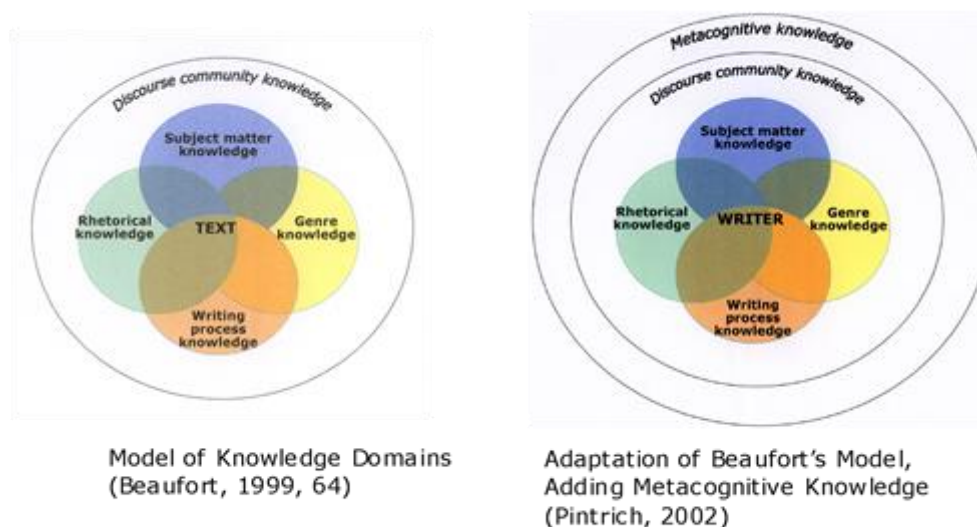


**Figure 1. All Writers View Response from Readers as a Mark of Success**

As Figure 1 indicates, the dominant definition of success had to do with evoking a response from readers. It is particularly interesting to note that relatively few writers viewed recognition or commercial rewards as primary indicators of success. All of the writers who wrote as a part of a business endeavor mentioned serving clients well as a critical form of success, and the five writers who are studying rhetoric and composition all said that they wanted to inform or instruct their readers about their subjects. Even some creative writers claimed this motive for writing.

### What Knowledge Domains Do Writers Draw From?

In her study of four writers making the transition from school to the workplace, Anne Beaufort posited that the writers needed to understand how to draw upon five knowledge domains when producing a text: subject matter, rhetorical, discourse community, genre, and writing process. We have adapted Anne Beaufort's (1999, p. 64) model of knowledge domains that writers must use to begin to illustrate how we think successful writers work. Because our study focuses on the development of individual writers, we have replaced "text" in the center of the diagram with "writer." Also, we have added the outer circle of metacognition to Beaufort's model because we observed that these successful writers continuously reflect on their efforts, on how well they perform, and on how to improve their skills. We derive our understanding of metacognition from education researcher Paul Pintrich (2002), who identifies three components of metacognition: 1) awareness of strategic knowledge—learning, process, and problem-solving strategies; 2) knowledge about cognitive tasks—level of difficulty, situational/social/convention/cultural norms; and 3) accurate self-knowledge—self-appraisal of strengths and weaknesses, self-management, beliefs about one's motivation linked to one's performance (pp. 220-222). Figure 2 depicts Beaufort's original model alongside of our adapted version of Beaufort's Venn diagram.



**Figure 2. Beaufort's Original Model of Knowledge and Researchers' Adaptation of This Model**

During our interviews, we noticed that all the writers eventually discussed each of these knowledge domains and their ability to recognize and use them. Table 1 provides the definitions we use for the knowledge domains.

**Table 1. Successful Writers Draw from Knowledge Domains**

Knowledge Domain	Knowledge Domain Defined
Subject matter knowledge	Information and/or understanding about the topic for a piece of writing
Genre knowledge	Understanding of the conventions of a particular kind of written text
Writing process knowledge	Information and/or understanding about how writers compose or produce a given text by planning, researching, drafting, and revising
Rhetorical knowledge	Information and/or understanding about the purpose(s) of a text, the claims and evidence that may be included in a text, the audience who will read a text, and the situation informing both the readers' and writer's views of the issues related to a text
Discourse community knowledge	Understanding the various expectations and needs of writers and readers who take part in discussions about a subject
Metacognitive knowledge	Self-awareness of methods of approaching writing tasks and the

	ability to articulate and assess personal strengths and weaknesses related to these methods
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We posit that success on a writing project results when these domains are put to use. The metacognitive circle is not intended to be an outer element even though it is illustrated as surrounding the rest of the model. In other words, writers do not necessarily access subject matter knowledge, for instance, through metacognition. Instead, the placement of the metacognitive domain as an outer element is intended as an overlay to indicate that self-reflection about all of these areas of expertise is characteristic of successful writers.

### What Habits of Mind Foster Success in Professional Writing?

While Beaufort uses noun-phrases to name the knowledge domains that writers possess, our interviews led us to believe that successful writers are able to put these knowledge domains into operation; we conceptualize this application as verb-phrased habits of mind. These are cognitive and affective expressions of the knowledge domains that we noticed as common to all the writers we interviewed. In other words, the writers put their knowledge domains into action by drawing on these habits of mind, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Successful Writers Share Habits of Mind**

Habit of Mind	Habit of Mind Defined
Persevere	Continuing to work on a task until it is completed
Attempt challenges	Taking on new tasks that may be difficult
Embrace learning	Having an interest in and reading about or researching new topics, issues, and ideas
Exhibit keen interest in subject	Understanding the benefits and necessity of working effectively with others
Engage in collaboration	Researching, drafting, and revising so that the views and concerns of editors, readers, and others are appropriately recognized
Understand how to write in complicated contexts	Researching, drafting, and revising so that the views and concerns of editors, readers, and others are appropriately recognized
Respond positively to critique	Being receptive to comments about your writing
Engage in metacognition	Considering how effectively you have performed past writing-related tasks and planning ways to improve

We do not see one-to-one correlations between particular habits of mind and knowledge domains. Instead, we believe that a writer's momentary consideration of a particular knowledge domain while he or she is at work on a task activates select habits of mind. We are aware that studies in other fields suggest that the development of expertise in professional practice relies on the development of expertise in learning (see Bereiter &




Scardamalia, 1993). The eight habits of mind we've isolated may be characteristic of expert learners.

In another short video clip, you can hear instances where a writer describes how he applied his mastery of five knowledge domains (discourse community, rhetorical, genre, subject matter, and metacognitive knowledge) by using four of these eight habits of mind (understands complicated contexts, perseveres, attempts challenges, and embraces learning). In this video clip, you'll meet Jeff Cebulski, a graduate with a concentration in rhetoric and composition and a former high school English teacher from Burlington, Wisconsin, who teaches first-year writing at West Georgia College and University. Jeff came to the master's in professional writing program with a passion for sports writing and jazz reviewing. He chose to tell us the story of a review he wrote for an e-zine, *Lumino*, about Tomasz Stanko, a Polish jazz trumpet player. In this part of his story, Jeff displays great sensitivity to rhetorical context and ethos as he recalls what it was like for him to produce a text in a complicated context. ([Click here for Jeff's video clip](#); [click here to view written transcript](#)). (Videos are in [QuickTime](#) format.)

Although we recognize a number of habits of mind and knowledge domains in operation here, we think this clip is particularly helpful in showing how a successful writer enacts rhetorical knowledge while working in a complicated context. In Table 3, the habits of mind that Jeff uses are highlighted in blue, while the knowledge domains he enacts are shown in purple; the dominant habit of mind that Jeff uses is his engagement in metacognition, as indicated in red. In this clip, Jeff reflects on his problem in gaining the authority he needs to write about jazz.

**Table 3. Jeff: Understanding a Complicated Context**

<i>"I'm interested in a field of writing, which is extremely competitive. There seems to be an exclusivity in some ways as to who should speak for what."</i>	<p><b>Understands complicated contexts</b></p> <p><b>Discourse community knowledge</b></p> <p><b>Rhetorical knowledge</b></p>
<i>"What would place me in a position where I could write with authority? I might think I have authority, but if editors and other people within the genre don't think you have authority, then chances are, you don't."</i>	<p><b>Perseveres</b></p> <p><b>Attempts challenges</b></p> <p><b>Discourse community knowledge</b></p> <p><b>Genre knowledge</b></p> <p><b>Rhetorical knowledge</b></p>
<i>"The fact is that while the gentleman is a good writer and he has musical background, I don't think he has what I have. But yet they decided to presume it because I'm not part of the clan."</i>	<p><b>Embraces learning</b></p> <p><b>Discourse community knowledge</b></p> <p><b>Subject matter knowledge</b></p>
	

## Engages in Metacognition

**Where and How Did the Writers Acquire These Habits of Mind?**

Early in the course of our research, we realized that the writers we interviewed had acquired the habits of mind that lead to success prior to entering the master's in professional writing program. When we asked them to identify where and how they gained these behaviors, once again, most writers gave multiple answers. That is why in the following graph (Figure 3) the totals exceed 15. Interestingly, transferring skills from other parts of their lives was more remarked upon than drawing on previous writing experience. Also, two-thirds of the writers remarked that they learned by doing, or diving into a project and picking up skills and revising their behavior and writing to suit unanticipated circumstances as they moved forward.



**Figure 3. Writers Identified Key Sources of Learning**

Two brief video clips illustrate how writers explained where they learned the behaviors essential to success. These clips illustrate the role of mentoring and the effect of having had a previous non-writing career. In the first clip, you'll hear Carol Ash discuss the valuable role mentors played in her career with the National Park Service. At the Martin Luther King, Jr., historic site in Atlanta, Carol moved from interpretive work to being an archivist and museum technician. As a result of that work, she published a book on historic Auburn Avenue with Hill Street Press. She was promoted to the Southeast Regional Office of the Park Service in Museum Services. In her interview, she focused on how she was learning to write Collection Management Plan documents ([click here for Carol's video clip](#); [click here to view her written transcript](#)). (Videos are in [QuickTime](#) format.)

The next clip features Leslie Johnston who runs a business as a freelance writer for the medical and hospital industries. She discusses how what she learned from her previous career as a fundraiser for the American Cancer Society helps her to serve her current clients' needs ([click here for Leslie's clip](#); [click to view her written transcript here](#)). (Videos are in [QuickTime](#) format.)

**Research Results**

From our analysis of the interview data, we discovered that successful writers:

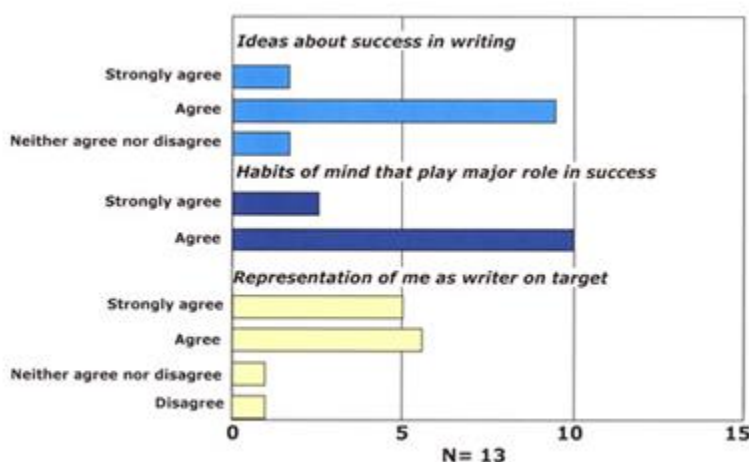
1. define success as gaining a response from readers
2. master six knowledge domains, including rhetorical, subject matter, genre, writing process, discourse community, and metacognitive knowledge
3. put their knowledge into action through eight similar habits of mind, including persevering, attempting challenges, embracing learning, exhibiting keen interest in subject, engaging in collaboration, understanding how to write in complicated contexts, responding positively to critique, and engaging in metacognition
4. acquire these abilities from a range of personal, professional, and academic experiences.

### Checking the Research Results

In keeping with the reciprocal, collaborative design of the research study, we invited the 15 research participants to help us determine how well their perceptions of what contributes to their success correlated with our qualitative research findings, that is, how accurately they thought the knowledge domains and the habits of mind that we generated described their personal strategies for successful writing. During a second round of data collection, participants:

- viewed a multimedia presentation of the findings featuring video clips from all 15 interviews
- viewed a DVD of their entire interview
- responded to an online anonymous survey about the multimedia presentation, the DVD, and the preliminary findings (See Appendix B for the survey questions.)
- rated the importance of the knowledge domains and habits of mind prior to and after participating in a videotaped focus group (See Appendix C for examples of the pre- and post-rating sheets.)

Figure 4 presents a summary of responses to three of the questions on the online follow-up survey, to which 13 of the participants responded. All of the responses for these three questions are included here. These answers, as well as others from the survey, validated our framework of analysis.



### Figure 4. Survey Confirmed Analytical Strategies

Figure 4 shows that they overwhelmingly agreed that we had isolated the most important ideas about success in writing; this figure shows in particular that they were really in strong agreement with how we represented them as writers in the multimedia presentation; and they strongly agreed with the eight habits of mind we identified as contributing to their feelings of success.

Prior to videotaping the focus group and afterwards as well, we asked the writers to rate the knowledge domains and habits of mind on paper in terms of importance and frequency with a 7 rating as “extremely important or “always” and a 1 rating as “extremely unimportant” or “never.” During a videotaped discussion of four specific questions, the six knowledge domains and eight habits of mind were glossed with the definitions in Tables 1 and 2, and these were presented in differing orders for the pre- and post-discussion ratings. These rating sessions served to remind the participants of the terms of the analytical framework and to ensure that they did not think we attributed any priority to the ordering of the six knowledge domains and eight habits of mind.

The focus group we invited the writers to participate in was, of course, more systematic and less conversational than the interviews we had conducted a year earlier because we wanted them to respond to the four dimensions of analysis we had derived from the 15 videotaped interviews. The focus group covered all four dimensions of analysis: definitions of success, knowledge domains, habits of mind, and sources of learning. In a short video clip, you’ll hear four of the research participants converse about one of the dimensions of analysis—the eight habits of mind. ([Click here for the focus group clip](#); [click here to view the group’s written transcript](#)). (Videos are in [QuickTime](#) format.)

Although the writers in this focus group did not use the terms for two of the eight habits of mind, they in fact did demonstrate the use of both of them, understanding complicated contexts and engaging in metacognition, as they spoke. The video of this session revealed that the writers rarely spoke of just one habit of mind in isolation. Instead, they often described situations in which they enacted several habits together.

### Why These Results Matter to Writing Teachers and Their Students

The results of this qualitative research study should prove useful to teachers whose courses include significant writing assignments because the findings alert teachers to the knowledge domains and habits of mind that they should observe in their students and encourage their students to develop. In particular, educators who expect their students to become successful writers in any subject area need to be explicit about metacognitive knowledge and the habit of self-reflectiveness that puts it into operation that is requisite of success in writing. This study makes available to researchers and teachers compelling and detailed video accounts of how mature writers discuss their craft and describe how they work, providing accessible role models for undergraduate and graduate students in writing. Instruction in the six knowledge domains and eight habits of mind isolated in this research study would engage students in practice of the cognitive and rhetorical understanding that is involved in getting words on the page to achieve a desired effect for particular readers over time and in response to the demands of a variety of workplaces to achieve career success.

### Notes

(1) As part of the Institutional Research Board approval for the qualitative research study, the 15 participants agreed to allow their names and videotaped interviews to be used in reports of the findings.

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## Appendix A

### Description of Text to be Selected for Reflective Analysis & Interview Questions and Ideas for Discussion Provided to Interviewees Prior to the Interview

## I. Description of Text to be Selected for Reflective Analysis

Each writer interviewed will select one text, which will serve as the basis for reflection about the experiences that have shaped his or her approach to organizational writing as well as his or her personal concept of success for an organizational writer. The text may be one written alone as a solo project or collaborated on with others. **Please note that the text need not be published or completed. It would be appropriate for this project if a significant portion of it were drafted or finished.** The text should have as many of the following characteristics listed below as possible:

The text is either or both of the following: 1) the writer's capstone project, or 2) a work project for a client or employer or a professional project undertaken on one's own initiative. Writers may select from a wide range of "genres" including creative pieces, book proposals, feature articles or other nonfiction texts, business proposals, annual or other business reports, newsletters, speeches, brochures, manuals, scholarly articles or research reports, and white papers

- The writer can share a copy of the final version of the text with the research team. If the text is a proprietary document, written permission to use it in this research project must be obtained by the participant and the researchers.
- At the time work began on the text, the writer considered the project a challenging one.
- The writer views the text itself or the experience of working on it as significant in his or her development as a writer and can explain why.
- The writer views the experience of working on the text as significant in the development of his or her career and can explain how.
- The task caused the writer to draw from previous writing, reading, and work experiences; these may be experiences gained in any context—personal creative projects, scholarly projects, classroom assignments, volunteer projects, internship and freelance projects, and work-related efforts.
- The writer recalls details about the text such as the way the task was conceived; the individuals and/or groups who needed the text; the audience(s) for the text; the situation that influenced decisions the writer made about the text; the organization, design, style, and tone of the text; and the review and approval process for the text.
- The writer recalls the approach, or process, used to write the text, that is whether the process was deliberative, based on personal or organizational research, rushed, cavalier, inspired by great commitment or emotion, directed by others, etc.

## II. Interview Questions and Ideas for Discussion

- Tell us the story of how you came to undertake this writing task.
- Describe the challenge of this project. For example, did it require extensive research? Careful planning? Close collaboration with others? Approval by readers who valued different qualities in a document?
- What previous education and/or experience of yours helped you as you worked on the project? This may be experience gained in any context—personal creative projects, scholarly projects, classroom assignments, instructional settings, volunteer projects, internship and freelance projects, and work-related efforts.
- What parts of this project were entirely new to you? When did you identify these new parts and how did you approach them? How did you learn to do this?
- How is this project significant in your development as a writer?
- How is it significant in your career?

- What kind(s) of planning did you do for this project? When did you make these plans? How did you learn to do this?
- How did you figure out the culture you were working in and how to succeed in that culture? How and when did you learn about and decide to adapt to the circumstances of this culture and/or its norms? What in your previous education and/or experience taught you how to do this?
- How did you learn to manage the project?
- How did you learn to work with other people who were involved in the project, such as other writers, designers, marketing specialists, corporate executives, or people who would review or approve the project?
- What personal strengths or weaknesses did you recognize as relevant as you worked on the task? How did you exploit or control these?
- Did you tackle this task differently than you had previous ones? When did you determine that you needed to be aware of your own habits and predilections as a writer or as a worker?
- What motivated your efforts on this project?
- On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being low and 10 high, how do you rate your performance on this project? Please explain the reasons you have for your rating.
- Did you repurpose or recycle this text or any parts of it for use in other documents?

## **Appendix B**

### **Online Research Project Questionnaire: What Leads to Success in Professional Writing?**

[Click here](#) for a Word document of Appendix B.

## **Appendix C**

### **Pre- and Post-Focus Group Rating Rubrics for Knowledge Domains and Habits of Mind**

[Click here](#) for a Word document of Appendix C.